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ONLINE TEACHING STYLES: A STUDY IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

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Abstract

This article presents a qualitative study based on the methodology of Grounded Theory with the intent to identify the teaching/ tutorial styles incorporated by instructors that deal with online courses as part of a graduate program offered by a Mexican institution of higher education. The research question that guided the study was: Which are the teaching styles that emerged from the educational practice in distance graduate courses offered online and how did certain characteristics manifest themselves to differentiate them from other courses?

The participants in this study were six online instructor-tutors (similar to the American English ‘teaching assistants’).

Through the process of collection of data with formal structured interviews documents such as: email messages, postings on interactive forums, observation of the participants, formal and structured interviews and electronic surveys the data was collected afterwards to generate the categories that typified styles of teaching/ tutorials online. The main finding was the four styles of online teaching: a) the designer oriented, b) the corrector oriented, c) the mediator oriented and d) the facilitator oriented. Each type of style manifests a group of qualities that allow for differentiation. The information gathered during this research should allow for the opportunity to bring about a new hypothesis for future research.

Keywords: distance education online; e-learning; grounded theory; instructor-tutors; teaching styles

1. Introduction

The work of teaching online distance courses has required the adoption of different roles in these new learning environments. According to Moore and Kearsley (1996) “the nature of teaching and the role of the instructor in distance education differs from the traditional classroom” (p. 125). In contrast to the assumed roles in the face-to-face format, these roles present certain challenges. One of the most important challenges for instructors dedicated to teaching online, is not only becoming good facilitators of acquisition of

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knowledge on the part of the students, but also in being vehicles to promote students to become more self-directed and to collaborate with other colleagues that they encounter in other geographical latitudes, whose messages can be asynchronous (Conrad, & Donaldson, 2004).

In the framework of these new roles and patterns, the styles of teaching of the instructors that offer tutorials in online courses, also acquire nuances and specific adjustments that are influenced by written communication and by the skills used with computers.

The difference between role and style is as follows: the first one is related to the wide range of activities a teacher might perform. The second one is the unique way in which those activities can be undertaken by the teacher.

The student-instructor relationship also acquires a new meaning. The interactions between the two are subject to the physical absence of one to the other. The psychological and social implications from the use of the electronic medium can have variances and they tilt the balance to be in favor or against the process of learning and teaching. This is to say that it is not the same to have the student in the classroom and observing his/her reactions in a direct way, as it is to have him/her through a computer monitor and imagining such reactions.

Beyond the design of courses online and the ever-increasing enrollments in these types of courses, it is important to recognize the patterns of performance of the instructors. This is a very important piece of the puzzle for the academic success of the students. It is for this reason -as well as a shortage of this line of research- that this study was undertaken, one whose basic proposal was to identify, categorize and describe the styles of tutorials that emerged from the distance educational practice online. The questions that guided the research were: What are the styles of tutorials resulting from the teaching practice in distance graduate courses offered online? How did certain characteristics manifest themselves to differentiate them from other courses?

Literature Review. Styles of Teaching

Teaching, contrary to learning, is an intentional process that conveys an objective or a goal. In the university environment covered here, teaching adopts various models that have to do with personal characteristics of the teacher, the institutional mission, the work environment, relationships with administrators and alternate factors that occasionally are not considered strictly related to teaching such as those mentioned by Dunn and Dunn (1998): time: class schedule; the number of students per course: small, medium and large, etc.

One of the first studies about the styles of teaching was that of Henson and Borthwick (1984). They distinguish six styles of teaching based on certain didactic processes: 1) task-oriented, the emphasis of these instructors is the structuring of activities based on materials available for the students; 2) oriented to cooperative planning, the teacher takes into account the opinions of the students so they jointly decide upon the best options to learn; 3) oriented to the students, the instructors design various

learning activities and ask the students to select what best suits them; 4) oriented to the subject matter, the content is the most important, the students are not taken into account; 5) oriented to learning, the instructors of this type have a genuine concern that the students will really achieve an understanding of the subject matter, and 6) oriented to emotional stimulation, the instructors are passionate in their classes and they emotionally impact their students. These styles are not mutually exclusive, as there are instructors that can show characteristics of more than one style.

Grasha (1996) proposes a theory of five styles of teaching. After an arduous process of interviews with colleagues and taking into consideration the vision of the students in the university where he was working, this author distinguishes the following styles: 1) expert, the instructor who has the knowledge and the experience that the students require (according to his/her own perception); 2) formal authority, it is s/he who maintains his/her *status* between the students for his/her knowledge and for the position within the institution; 3) personal model, it is s/he who thinks “an example for the students”, and by means of his own doing shows the students the proper ways to think and to act; 4) facilitator, the one who guides the students toward learning through questioning, alternatives and decision-making, and 5) delegator, the instructor that gives freedom to students to be as autonomous as possible, motivating them to work independently or in small groups. Similar to the theory of Henson and Borthwick, Grasha (1996) stipulates that the styles are not unique or mutually exclusive.

Within the philosophical orientation of teaching, Zinn (1998) distinguishes five philosophies into which educators of adults can be divided: 1) Behavioral, the one who promotes competency, development of skills and behavioral change; s/he assures conformity to standards and social expectations; 2) Liberal (arts), s/he develops the intellectual capacity of students, increases learning in the broadest sense and furnishes a general and multifaceted education; 3) Progressive, supports responsible participation in society, offers the student practical knowledge and problem solving skills; 4) Humanistic, s/he who increases personal growth and development of the students, in such a way to also facilitate individual self-realization; y 5) Radical, s/he who achieves fundamental changes in society through education, in social, cultural political and economic order.

These philosophies are affected by the experiences that each instructor has had throughout his/her career as a teacher or, better said, by the influences of other instructors in his/her own time as a student.

Relationship of Styles and Online Education

The theories of the styles of learning and of teaching are rooted in face-to-face teaching, in other words, in an environment of teaching-learning in which the instructor interacts live with students in the classroom. Additionally, these theories are different at various educational levels. Distance education, however, refers principally to higher education and supposes that instructors and students are separated in time and space (García, 1994).

In accordance with Bates (1995) online education is one of the forms of distance education and refers to the use of technology to impart courses, principally the use of a

computer and access to the Internet. Oblinger and Murayama (1996) call it distributed learning in a virtual environment where students and teachers access a learning space at different times and in different places through the use of a computer.

The idea of considering learning and teaching styles in online education for reasons of research and to improve education is not new. Liu and Ginther (2002) analyze the characteristics of students and online technology and suggest a pairing of the instruction materials with the styles of learning of students, also that the instructional strategies be diverse in an intent to consider all of the preferences of the students.

Díaz and Cartnal (1999) emphasize the importance of taking distance courses in higher education and viewing it as imperative the need to adjust styles of student learning to the conditions offered in the online format. Pallof and Pratt (2003) agree that online education deserves a more ample variety of activities in order to achieve maintaining interest, motivation and sense of accomplishment in the students. The instructors require instructional techniques that are oriented to satisfy the styles of the students.

As with Taylor (2002) the teachers as much as the students each bring their own style, abilities and characteristics to the virtual classroom. Course sites on the Internet can be a platform to reflect one's own personality and to transmit a personal style from one to the other. Nevertheless, for the designs of the courses online that intend to consider the styles of teachers and students, interaction is an element that has been considered key in this format (Graham, 2001).

When the technology of distance education is more interactive, one creates a feeling for the students that is more like a true classroom (Hiltz, & Wellman, in King, 2002). Upon increasing the support and help in the form of feedback from the instructor, the students become more secure and more aware of their learning. Therefore, the function of the instructors in distance courses is not so much in designing courses or communicating information as in knowing how to support collaborative work and encouraging students to work as part of a team (King, 2002).

However, many instructors have figured out that collaborative work is not the key to success for the student in an online format: certain distinct characteristics are required like self-motivation and self-discipline (Uhlir, 2002). If freedom and flexibility of the online environments require a personal profile of responsibility, commitment and discipline to be able to continue the flow of progress, are students who do not have these characteristics condemned to failure in this online distance education format? In this way, Luk Suez Ching (1998) did a study of nurses in Hong Kong who were taking distance courses and mentions in their discovery that many of them changed their cognitive style from dependent to independent due to participation in this self-directed learning. This is interesting given the agreement with certain suppositions about cognitive styles; modification of the style occurs more with the preferences (learning styles) than with the tendencies (cognitive styles) (Lozano, 2000).

What characteristics do the instructors who work in online education show? Zisow (2000) maintains that teachers who first teach in a face-to-face setting spill over their teaching style into the new technology they employ thus, contrary to what is thought, it is not the technology that determines the style of teaching. The way in which the teacher motivates, leads and monitors the learning of the student online has to do with his/her

own concept of teaching (Zinn, 1998). So what are these characteristics of all the styles, profiles and varieties of observable and non-observable patterns that we are talking about? Can the teachers be classified in categories and styles of teaching or tutors online?

2. Method

Research Approach

The research approach selected for this study is the Grounded Theory (Glaser, 1998; Strauss and Corbin, 1998), in which, according to Charmaz: “we tend to look at slices of social life” (2000, p. 522). With it, it is also possible to identify the connections between events that permeate the mechanisms in those which a social group develops.

There are various reasons for the selection of this methodology. First and in accordance with Pandit (1996), the three basic elements of the Grounded Theory are the concepts, the categories and the proposals. In this sense, in the panorama of the educational styles products of studies taking place in the last one hundred years can be enlisted, an infinity of concepts and categories that have to do with the profiles of the styles that people show in learning and teaching: amongst others, sensory preferences, social preferences, and instructional preferences.

Secondly, in distance education there does not exist much evidence of the configuration of styles that teachers show when giving courses online. Hines and Pearl (2004) mention that teachers who deal with online courses show certain teaching styles associated with strategies that they use to monitor their students, but they do not identify specifically any typology nor make any allusion to the type of strategies used.

Thirdly, the theory is constructed with facts that are obtained in a natural setting. The existing models on the styles of learning and teaching do not permit predetermining the performances, the answers or the academic results of the teachers in their interaction with the students by means of the computer, independent of the software selected, rather more the social interactions within the traditional classroom. This is the reason why is necessary to have a reference point that attempts to describe and to make understandable the diversity of styles in online education, in an effort to improve current practices that sometimes are overlooked (Popkewitz, 1990).

Context

The context is Virtual University (UV) of the Tecnológico de Monterrey in Mexico. Typical academic offices are located on the ground floor in a 12-floor building.

The physical area occupies nearly 800 square meters. There are eight closed offices and twenty-three independent cubicles without doors. In these offices there are instructors of the courses offered in the Graduate School of Education and 95% of them have a doctorate. The teaching-tutors that tend to the online courses occupy the cubicles. Only 5% have doctorates and the rest have a Master's in their area of expertise.

Tenured professors are responsible for the pedagogical design of the courses

(principally) and occasionally the monitoring of the students. The core of teacher-tutors, (or as they are called in American English *teaching assistants* however, with much of the responsibility of *adjunct lecturers*) are those who occasionally participate in the course's design but whose main area of responsibility is the monitoring of the students.

Sample

Six online teacher-tutors were chosen from the Graduate School of Education. The selection was made according to the principle of being intentional or with a purpose (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). The selection criteria in this case were: a) They had more than five years experience working online and b) They had sufficient accreditation and training from the department at the Virtual University.

Instruments

The collection of information was achieved through document collection (email messages, postings on the interactive forums), observation of the participants, formal and structured interviews, electronic surveys and detailed note taking (Gay, 1996). In the Grounded Theory, as in most qualitative methods, a primary source of information is the interview (Glaser, 1998). The sampling is not dependent on only one interview with the subjects or on only one collection of data (Charmaz, 2000). In this study the data were compared in various phases, through various interviews and with the help of other sources of information such as electronic messages from the participants and their electronic interaction or telephone calls with students. From there is where the categories are generated that will permit the outlining of the body of the grounded theory (Pandit, 1996).

The process of the research was achieved in various stages: In the first stage was the initial approach to the context of the study, the selection of the participants and the beginning of the data collection over a period of three consecutive semesters; in the second phase or the intermediate phase, the data collection continued and this yielded the first categories; in the third phase the second categories were generated, and to conclude, the final categories and the discussion of the data and the conclusions.

It is important to point out the participation and the interaction of the authors of this investigation that was critical at all moments during the development and analysis of the information.

3. Results

As the initial product of the process of open codification, the first categories of the analysis are presented, obtained from the first group of interviews and directed to the aspect of the habits of online teaching and the technical and organizational dimensions. Given that the styles are based on preference, all of the categories contain different

alternatives. The following table shows the synthesis with the respective selection alternatives.

Table 1. Categories of analysis in the work of the online teacher-tutor

FIRST CATEGORIES	ALTERNATIVES
1- Preferred electronic tool for teaching	A – Email B – Interactive forums C - Chat D – Instant messaging
2- Frequency of use of email	A- Always open B – Three times a day C – Two times a day D – Only in the morning E- Only in the afternoon
3- Frequency of use in the interactive forums	A – Three times a day B – Two times a day C – Once a day D – Two times a week E – Once a week
4- Frequency of the chat function to offer help	A – Once a week B – Two times a week C – When the student asks
5- Frequency of use of instant message	A – Always open B – Once a week
6- Use of email messages	A – To give advise B – To answer doubts C – To motivate students
7- Type of participation in the interactive forums	A – To ask content questions B – To motivate participation of students C – To guide the conversation in the forum D – To have a presence in the forum E – To encourage student reflection
8- Type of daily recording of work of teaching-tutor	A – Journal or log B - Post it C - Checklist D – Notebook
9 – Activities on the computer (rest or entertainment)	A - Surfing Internet B – Instant message C - Chat D – Personal email E – Listen to music
10 – Type of noise that interrupts the work of the teacher-tutor	A – Telephone ringing B – Loud laughing C - Conversations D – The smell of food E – Shouting

After reaching the process of classification of the first categories, the cross between the distinct categories was attempted (axial codification), in order to allow identification of observable patterns in the styles of online teaching with the basis on the preferences of the habits. Nevertheless, the results would produce more than five hundred possibilities for being able to classify unique styles. For example, consider an instructor with the following characteristics, in which the number represents a category and the letter, an alternate:

$1A + 2A + 3A + 4A + 5A + 6A + 7A + 8A + 9A + 10A + 11A = \text{Type 1}$
 $1B + 2A + 3A + 4A + 5A + 6A + 7A + 8A + 9A + 10A + 11A = \text{Type 2}$
 $1C + 2A + 3A + 4A + 5A + 6A + 7A + 8A + 9A + 10A + 11A = \text{Type 3}$
 etc.

Thus, according to Dunn and Dunn (1998) in this first classification, it is best for the purposes of this study to consider the profiles of styles and not the identifiable and specific; in other words, the same combinations without assigning particular labels.

The majority of the interviewed instructors agreed that the use of email was the first activity of the day occurring upon arriving to the workplace. Invariably, and although the dynamic was slightly different, the teaching work on the course sites was then secondary until the email had been read.

The utilization of folders in the Outlook email as a form of organization was a common characteristic amongst all the participants. Based on this, one can assume the hypothesis that the experience in the work of the teacher-tutor goes along consolidating more effective forms of work, at least with regard to email.

Table 2. Determination of the secondary categories of analysis in the work of the teacher-tutor

SECONDARY CATEGORIES	POSSIBLE ANSWERS
1 – Attitude toward the student	A - Responsible B - Cordial C - Amiable D - Fair E - Impartial F – Attentive
2 – Type of orientation	A – Towards task B – Towards people
3 – Stance with regard to student conflict	A – Mediator B – Conciliator
4 – Type of technological habits	A – Handling of Internet B – Handling of Windows
5 – Type of basic habits	A – Written communication B – Immediate feedback
6 – Type of secondary habits	A - Motivating B - Dynamic C – Fun
7 – Pedagogical vision	A – Facilitator of learning B – Expert in content

As a result of the process of subsequent codification, the second set of categories of analysis surfaced from information collected in the second interview, and it was more focused on the strategies and perceptions of the online teaching. The categories of analysis are shown on the following chart.

Based on the defined categories, on the topic of habits, as well as on the perceptions of the instructors with regard to the strategies of the online teaching, and extrapolating from Zinn's (1998) philosophy of education, contrasting it with the results of the observations by the Author, a composite of the four styles of teacher-tutor was developed. The mentioned characteristics in each one follow the characteristics obtained by the Author in the analysis of the data and the confrontation with the literature in the area. The preferences are based on many factors (Dunn and Dunn, 1998) and are legitimized in online teaching practice that was where this research took place.

Again, this is based on the fact that the styles are not absolute and that they respond to the needs, the personalities and the preferences of the instructors (Sternberg, 1997). It must also be mentioned that the styles are not determinant and that some instructors can present characteristics shared between the various styles.

There is a theoretic integration of the categories and the dimensions that have been presented in the previous phases. The ties and the interrelationships between some of the concepts follow decisions made by the authors of this investigation.

Here the characteristics of each are explained.

a) Designer oriented.

This instructor is a visionary and establishes constant innovations in the courses in which s/he participates.

- "I like to be constantly bettering our teaching and putting out new ideas that refresh the dynamic of the format" (Professor number 3, P3).

S/he establishes from the beginning a code of ethic regardless of whether one exists or not in the institution. Her/his vision is pragmatic and s/he looks for integral development in the students.

S/he is careful in the design of the learning activities in her/his course when the opportunity arises. S/he modifies each course assignments as to deter the possibility of copying from one semester to the next.

- "Truthfully, students are very smart and ask acquaintances for homework from past semesters. If they are clever, we should be even more so." (P3).

S/he he looks for continuous improvement and frequently takes on classes of management in innovative technology and new currents in education. Although s/he likes to use email to be in touch with students as much as other formats like the interactive forums, s/he prefers the forums to give consistency to work. The educational philosophies which most pertain to this style are the humanistic and the progressive.

b) Corrector oriented.

This type is a sleuth. S/he is analytic and looks for perfectionism in students. S/he focuses quite a bit on the structure of the assignments: words and format.

- "I am very good at detecting small things that are 'off' in my students. I always note what has been copied or plagiarized. It is a special talent I have" (Professor number 5, P5).

S/he constantly lets the students know that s/he is aware of progress and that when opportunities arise s/he corrects them. The correction at the beginning can appear harsh to the students who are sensitive but they end up accepting it.

- "I do not like when students address me with the informal "you" (in Spanish this is "tú" instead of "usted/Ud."). One must always establish respect and besides, we are not equals. It is not that I am arrogant, but it is important to establish." (P5).

S/he is an expert on content and likes it when students ask questions when in doubt. S/he uses the online forums frequently to get to know the students. Email is not commonly used as s/he does not like the synchronous methods to keep in touch, except perhaps the telephone. S/he is task oriented.

The educational philosophies which most pertain to this style are behavioral and liberal arts.

- "If you ask me what my communication style is, how I would consider it, that is, I would not consider that I am *sweet, sweet*, period; but I am empathetic, my communication style is direct, it is outright, don't lick your wounds, get to work and do what you have to do. And I believe that at times, for students, above all those who know me, it is confusing to them at the beginning of the semester. They always complain "oh, s/he does not like me", "you are somewhat arrogant, rude and mean", but once they realize that this is the way to help them come out ahead, everything calms down, as they get used to it and get good results. This gives me a good outcome, I don't have many people in my face, they don't confront me much. I consider that I am not the type to walk into traps, for example, if someone like a student gets annoyed and angry, I don't go there, I just say, "of course, let's keep an eye on that, see you later, take care", in other words, although I am mad, I don't let it get to me" (P5).

c) Mediator oriented.

This instructor is a humanist. S/he offers a vote of confidence to the students. S/he believes her/himself responsible for the problems of the students within the system. The students are not the perpetrators, rather the victims that try to subsist in a competitive and selective system.

- "One must move away from the supposition that the students are good by nature, right? Like what Rousseau mentions in his work "Emilio". We should orient the students in knowing that the world is aggressive and competitive" (Professor number 6, P6).

When s/he detects a case of conflict, in general s/he takes the opportunity to be conciliatory. The content is important, but it is not everything. The basis for a good

education is rooted in the ability to negotiate and in the common good. S/he is a people-oriented instructor.

- "Dialog is important. As difficult as the situation may be, negotiation with students is necessary. Complaints do not come alone; they always come accompanied by reasons" (P6).

S/he promulgates in students the spirit of social justice and exhorts the idea of not letting classmates who do not do the work get away with it and to always turn them in if that is the case.

- "...I began to boost [ethics] in the students, in the forums I would post advisories to not forget about themselves since (sic) they were working a lot on teams; I began to promote in them that there were students who did not work to not include them on the front page of the paper" (P6).

S/he prefers the interactive forums online to as a way to communicate with students. The best fit as far as educational philosophy for this type of instructor is humanistic and progressive.

d) Facilitator oriented.

This is the instructor who considers students as thinking beings that find themselves in the process of formation. S/he likes to inquire if the students are confronting a problematic situation so they will look for help. S/he likes to advise students in cognitive holes when detected.

- "I think that students who are taking a graduate course load want to improve their professional formation. In other words, they are adults that make decisions and resolve problems daily; they are thinkers" (Professor number 2, P2).

His/her feedback is long and detailed. His/her function as an instructor is to facilitate without getting too involved on a personal level with students. More task-oriented, but at times people-oriented (in atypical cases s/he finds her/himself always up-to-date on everything and uses quite a bit of synchronic tools for advisory like chat or instant messenger).

- "I really like to use instant messenger because I feel it is a better way to take advantage of time with the student. Questions are planted at the moment and responses are fresh and I think that better serves the student" (P2).

Occasionally, the telephone can be used by these instructors to strike up communication with the students that have not communicated since the beginning of the course. Additionally, the interactive forums are a better option than email.

- "Forums are better than email when you are working in an asynchronous fashion. There you see the thread (sic) of the messages. What they said, what you said, etc. On the other hand, email is just more complicated" (P2).

The best fits regarding philosophy of education for this person are the liberal arts and progressive.

Each style shares some characteristics with the other three. Nonetheless, each one has its own peculiar characteristic, and it is precisely the process of the selective codification in which the characteristics shown emerge above the rest.

4. Conclusions and Implications

The analysis of data responded to a process most closely identified with a qualitative methodology. It requires the ability to recognize what on the surface is not perceived (Charmaz, 2000). Many authors supported the identification of the styles of learning and teaching focused on certain particulars: environmental, based on personality, sensory, sociological, psychological, cognitive, instructional, etc. (Lozano, 2000). In distance education online, the same schemes of interpretation that are used in a face-to-face mode are repeated (Pallof, & Pratt, 2003).

The obtained results guarantee at least the identification of four specific styles (designer, corrector, mediator and facilitator oriented) but independent at the same time. The patterns of each one carry with it the professional history of the instructor and of his/her antecedents and experiences in life, that which has led him/her to act in a certain way. Zinn (1998) points out that all instructors manifest a philosophy of education of adults based on antecedents. An instructor is not born teaching. Nevertheless, in order to arrive at a career, s/he had to have had more than twenty distinct models of instructors in his/her own formation: from elementary school until the university career. The schemas of how to act, gestures, attitudes and values manifest themselves in each person as an inexorable result of his/her interaction with others.

An instructor can show characteristics or patterns of work in his/her teaching that can result in the assigning of his/her certain style. Nonetheless, according to Sternberg (1997) the styles are not absolute. The attributes can change with time and the instructors can change from semester to semester.

Nor is any style in particular being magnified or minimized. Armed with this knowledge, the emphasis is arriving at the point where one can draw out some lines of effective action that allow the instructors to benefit most from their strengths yet neutralize their weaknesses. The most common strategies, the most effective recommendations, and the lines of action most utilized in the plane of teaching can be shared and assimilated, for some, those that they themselves do not even know exist. Although each human has his/her own characteristics of manner and behavior, each person has the opportunity to become acquainted with other alternatives and s/he can find the opportunity to grow personally and professionally (Mamchur, 1996).

This study has generated many questions for following studies and to illuminate a line of investigation still scarcely studied. Some aspects that can be studied are: Which are the most successful styles of instructors, in terms of the results of the opinions of the students? Do more styles exist that can be identified that serve as a platform for this study? What is the relationship between the online teaching styles of the professors and

the level of satisfaction of the students concerning the learning acquired? Which are the styles of the most successful teachers in terms of the impressions of the students themselves? What is the level of satisfaction of the instructors that manifest a certain style in terms of their relations with students?

The role of the instructor-tutor in the online format takes on a hint of a protagonist in the new environs, in order to make possible a pedagogical process that if it does not equal the results of face-to-face education, it surpasses them. Insofar as an understanding by educators gets closer to the educational phenomenon of online teaching, the ever-increasing usage of the format will result in the bettering of those same pedagogical processes.

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